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ABSTRACT

A discussion of institutional stature in higher education focuses on its development and determination and strategies for its enhancement. The central theme is that although colleges and universities are affected by trends in the external environment, they can plan, respond, act, and organize themselves to improve their stature. The report examines the dimensions of stature and then looks at the dynamics of enhancement: the coordinated actions that institutions can take beyond marketing and public relations to address forces in the environment while simultaneously educating the public about important goals, purposes, outcomes, and benefits of postsecondary education. Stature is seen as the product of an environment in which multiple forces influence the exchange of resources between universities and different constituencies; inputs in the form of constituents' needs and expectations; attributes of organization and performance; a conversion process that transforms inputs into decision; outputs to multiple constituencies; formal and informal communication about outputs to constituencies; and feedback in the form of public perceptions of the outputs. It is concluded that institutions can enhance their stature by four strategies: strategic assessment, resource allocation, outcomes assessment, and image management. (MSE)

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Public Image and the University

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Colleges and universities are resource-acquiring institutions. They understand that positive public attitudes about higher education are important because they affect their financial stability and support of their academic programs. Faculty and administrators have come to recognize that public understanding and support for postsecondary education goals is important to institutional well-being. Given this reality, higher education institutions have no choice but to be cognizant of their stature with important constituencies if they expect to gain and hold public support. If colleges and universities are to enhance their stature in a period of rapid social, economic, demographic, and technological change, substantive strategies must be developed. Without specific action, most institutions will find themselves the target of continuing criticism by external publics, ranging from students and parents making decisions about enrollment to government agencies making decisions about financial appropriations.

The central topic of this report is not marketing, public relations, strategic planning, or management strategies to improve institutional visibility over the short run. It is rather institutional stature, its development and determination, and strategies for its enhancement. A constant theme dominates the report: Although colleges and universities are unquestionably affected by trends in the external environment, they can plan, respond, act, and organize themselves to improve stature. This report examines the deeper, more fundamental dimensions of stature and then moves beyond that examination to the dynamics of enhancement—the coordinated actions that institutions can take beyond marketing and public relations to address forces in the environment while simultaneously educating the public about important goals, purposes, outcomes, and benefits of postsecondary education.

What is Stature?

Postsecondary institutions generally seek congruence between social values associated with or implied by their activities and the values in the larger social environment of which they are a part. When an actual or potential disparity exists between institutional and societal values, a threat to stature will exist. These threats take the form of legal, economic, and social sanctions associated with changing attitudes and perceptions of the institution by external publics.

Stature can be understood as the aggregate of positive perceptions and representations held by specific individuals, groups, and publics in reference to particular characteristics and/or performance attributes projected by colleges and universities over time. Its forms of expression in colleges and universities are multiple, as are the contexts in which it can be viewed. Stature can be perceived in a macro context in which higher education exists as a sum of parts that together make up a social institution. It can be seen in a micro context in which individual institutions and campus locations become the units of analysis. Both of these contexts require consideration in the examination of stature, how it forms, and its consequences for colleges and universities.

What Are the Dimensions of Stature?

To comprehend fully the multiple dimensions of stature implicit in the preceding definition, it is important to array its dimensions in a model that will enable practitioners to understand features of the concept and the relationships that make each dimension relevant to the others. The model developed and presented in this report depicts stature as the product of (1) an *environment* comprised of multiple forces that influence the exchange of resources between colleges and universities and different constituencies, (2) *inputs* in the form of constituents' needs and expectations for educational programs and services that carry stimuli from the environment to the institution and induce decisions about programs and resources, (3) *attributes of organization and performance* that facilitate or retard institutional responsiveness to external constituencies by influencing important decisions related to domains of activity, (4) a *conversion process* that transforms constituents' needs and expectations and environmental stimuli into decisions about programs and resources, (5) *outputs* that carry the results of institutional programs and services to multiple constituencies in the enviornment, (6) *communication* that involves formal and informal procedures for disseminating information about outputs to constituencies, and (7) *feedback* that transmits public perceptions relative to the outputs produced by an institution in one period back to the conversion process as the inputs in a later period of time. Each dimension interacts with the others. Together they produce stature for an institution.

What Are Organizations Doing to Enhance Stature?

In response to changing conditions in the economy, public opinion, and the behavior of competitors, profit and nonprofit organizations have instituted a variety of techniques to enhance stature. Measured through sales volume, corporate visibility, and change in public opinion, most techniques have focused on improvement in corporate products and services based on information about consumers' needs, preferences, values, and satisfaction. Significant resources have been spent on opinion research, marketing, improvement in services, and staff development to improve the public's perception of organizational products and operations.

Colleges and universities differ sharply from other complex organizations in certain characteristics. Institutions seeking to improve their understanding of stature and how it develops may benefit from the experience of other organizations, however. A few institutions have grasped the importance of institutional stature and, borrowing from successful practices in other complex organizations, have designed and implemented strategies to improve it. The majority of colleges and universities, however, have concentrated on short-term marketing practices that rely solely on communication activities.

What Can Colleges and Universities Do to Enhance Stature?

The dimensions of stature presented in the model, when examined in context with practices to enhance stature employed by different types of organizations, suggest four leveraging strategies that can become the focus on efforts to enhance stature in colleges and universities.

- *Strategic assessment:* management of the effects of societal change on institutional programs, services, and resources through environmental scanning, monitoring, and strategic planning;
- *Allocation of resources:* Improvement of institutional responsiveness to changing external conditions through resource allocation systems that incorporate mechanisms for planning feedback, and innovation;
- *Outcomes assessment:* Collection and publication of benefit-cost information describing institutional and student outcomes, expenditures, and costs as a means for demonstrating accountability to important constituencies;
- *Image management:* Management of public opinion through assessment of the effectiveness of institutional marketing and public relations techniques coupled with redesign of organizational communications strategies to create impact with constituencies.

The assumption underlying these leveraging strategies is that as institutions come to better understand how societal forces, public opinion, and organizational behavior interact to determine stature, they will move to develop activities that result in enhancement. Most institutions, prodded by recent criticism, have begun to develop marketing and public relations plans. Much energy is expended on these plans, with mixed results. An examination of what the literature has to say about complex organization practices and public affairs strategies employed by colleges and universities makes it clear that many of these efforts are cosmetic. They attack the symptoms of the problem, but they do not address the problem itself. Instead of piecemeal public relations efforts with selected constituencies, it would be wiser to develop a coordinated plan for enhancement involving the leveraging strategies presented. Instead of vesting too much faith in marketing and public relations plans that often do little more than temporarily appease certain constituencies, institutions can improve stature through altering their approach to management. The goal is this: Develop assessment and communication systems that enable institutions to effectively anticipate and respond to external forces while simultaneously educating the public about important goals, purposes, outcomes, and benefits of postsecondary education.

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